

Research Brief

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Districts Say Convenience for Parents, Not Competition, is Result of Open Enrollment

Wisconsin's Open Enrollment program, which policymakers hope will improve educational performance by introducing competition to public schools, allows students to enroll in any district in the state, provided space is available. First implemented in the 1998-1999 school year, the program now includes 1% of all Wisconsin K-12 students. In its first year, 2,464 students transferred districts. In 2001-2002, a total of 8,390 students transferred, a 240% growth in four years. And while 12 districts saw no transfers in or out in 1998-1999, only one district, Washington, was thusly unaffected by the program in 2001-2002. Similarly, the number of districts in which no students transferred in has been reduced from 47 in 1998-1999 to six districts today. In addition, 12 districts had no students transfer out four years ago, but only four districts can make that claim now.

Therefore, Open Enrollment is now a familiar program to all the state's school districts. The Public Policy Forum's new survey of school district administrators about the program finds few administrators across the state view Open Enrollment as an incentive to compete for students by improving their educational offerings or performance. Half of the respondents feel Open Enrollment does not make public schools more competitive and three-fourths feel it does not improve education in their district. In fact, parental convenience is the most commonly cited reason administrators give for student participation in the program. One-fourth of the respondents feel the program is an administrative burden; the most frequently suggested changes to the program include reducing the required paperwork and eliminating

Key Findings

- Over 8,300 students participated this year at a per-pupil state aid amount of \$5,059. This results in a total program cost of nearly \$42 million.
- 70% of responding districts did not spend any money on marketing this year. Of those that did, they spent an average of \$115.
- Responding administrators estimate they spent a total of \$489,721 and 19,655 hours administering the program this year.
- Nearly all districts rely on word-of-mouth to advertise their district to potential students. 78% use district publications such as newsletters or websites for this purpose. 18% advertise on TV or radio.
- 76% say their district has not made any changes to retain or attract students. Of the 42 districts making changes in the future, about one-fourth will be adding marketing and about a third will be making curricular or programmatic changes.
- While 66% of respondents are at least somewhat satisfied with Open Enrollment itself, 62% are not satisfied with the workload of administering the program.
- Smaller districts report spending fewer hours on program administration than medium-sized districts, despite similar numbers of transfer students.
- District administrators cite convenience, family relocations, and dissatisfaction with the resident district as the top three reasons students transfer.

In May 2002, the Forum mailed a two-page survey to the Open Enrollment Coordinator of each of the state's 426 school districts. We received 227 completed surveys by the response deadline, for a return rate of 53%. The returned surveys represent 58% of the state's student population.



Districts Dissatisfied with Open Enrollment Workload

In Open Enrollment's fourth year, school districts continue to express dissatisfaction with the amount of paperwork required to administer the program at a rate equal to the dissatisfaction expressed in the program's inaugural year. In 2001-2002, 62% of the survey respondents feel "Not Satisfied" with the workload of administering Open Enrollment. The same percent was not satisfied in 1998-1999.

While initial complaints about workload could be due to the steep learning curve of implementing a new program, the continued dissatisfaction is more surprising. However, it appears likely that the tremendous growth of the Open Enrollment program has fueled administrators' frustrations. Commensurate with the increased number of participating students, districts have seen the number of hours they spend administering the program increase. While this increase in administrative time is small compared to the very large increase in transferring students, it represents

over two weeks per district of full-time work spent administering Open Enrollment.

Administrators also voiced concerns about the program's workload when asked, "What changes, if any, would you like to see in the Open Enrollment Program?" Of the 200 responses to this question, 25% specifically suggest "Less paperwork" as a change to the program. Another oft-mentioned suggestion that would reduce the amount of paperwork required is to count all non-resident transfer students as resident students for aid and membership purposes. These responses are discussed further on page six.

Greater Workload, Less Cost

We also find the total cost to school districts of administering Open Enrollment has decreased since 1998-1999, despite the continued increased workload. School districts have, therefore, become more efficient at administering the program. In addition, the start-up costs of implementing the program appear to no longer be having much impact.

Growth in Open Enrollment Administration by School Districts

	1998-1999 Survey (N=265)	2001-2002 Survey (N=227)	% Change 1998-1999 to 2001-2002
Number of students transferring	1,819	4,533	149%
Open Enrollment per pupil payment	\$4,551	\$5,059	11%
Total amount spent administering Open Enrollment	\$522,738	\$489,721	-6%
Total time spent administering Open Enrollment	16,857 hours	19,655 hours	17%



Impacts Differ by District Size

Our survey revealed that the impacts of the Open Enrollment program differ, depending on the size of the school district. In particular, the bigger the district, the more time and money the district spends to administer open enrollment. For example, districts with fewer than 900 students report spending an average of 37 hours administering an average of 22 transfers, while districts with more than 7,200 students report spending 646 hours administering 190 transfers. In addition, within our survey sample we find that districts with over 1,900 students estimate they spend considerably more on Open Enrollment than districts with fewer than 1,900 students.

Bigger Districts are Different

Another difference that appears when the size of the district is examined takes the form of a negative relationship between district size and whether the administrator anticipates making changes in the future in order to retain or attract students under Open Enrollment. Administrators of larger districts are somewhat less likely to anticipate making such changes. This may be because they are already attracting more transfer students and therefore do not feel the need to compete for more. Or maybe the expense of administering the program has resulted

in a reluctance to increase the number of transfer students requiring processing. Another explanation could be unrelated to the Open Enrollment program itself—change in general may be harder to achieve in larger districts.

Differences in Change, Satisfaction by Size

School Districts	% Reporting Future Changes	% Reporting Satisfaction
Smaller Districts (=4700 students)	17	69
Larger Districts (>4700 students)	13	87

Finally, we find that larger districts are significantly more likely to report satisfaction with the Open Enrollment program than are smaller districts. This may be because although smaller districts have smaller numbers of transfer students, they may represent a greater percentage of these districts' total student body, thereby making a greater impact on the districts.

Note: MPS was not included in statistical analyses of size, due to its outlier effect.

Differences in Program Administration by District Size

Size	Average Transfers In	Average Transfers Out	Average Time Spent Administering	Average Amount Spent Administering
Small Districts 1-900 total students (N=106)	13	9	37 hours	\$1,176.96
Small to Medium Districts 901-1,900 total students (N=61)	21	23	81 hours	\$2,431.83
Medium Districts 1,901-4,700 total students (N=45)	28	22	140 hours	\$5,277.88
Medium to Large Districts 4,701-7,200 total students (N=8)	53	37	339 hours	\$3,083.33
Large Districts 7,201+ total students (N=8, including MPS)	46	144	646 hours	\$28,120.00



Districts Neither Marketing Themselves Nor Making Changes to Attract Transfer Students

Of the 227 surveys returned, 160, or 70%, indicate that the school district does not spend any money to advertise or market to non-resident parents. On average, districts indicate they spent \$115 on marketing for open enrollment last school year; however, one district spent \$11,000.

The most common way of advertising is through district publications, such as a newsletter or website. When asked how non-resident parents interested in participating in Open Enrollment obtain information about their school district, 78% of administrators indicate that district publications are used. However, most districts (81%) rely on word-of-mouth to interest non-resident parents.

When asked what types of information about their district is made available, most administrators respond that they provide information on school district characteristics (67%) and academic and/or special programs (58%). Most do not make available information on the number of openings for open enrollment students (15%) or on integration opportunities (14%).

Marketing is a Change for the Future

In addition, the majority of district administrators (76%) say that their districts are not making any changes to retain or attract pupils. As for future changes, only 16% of administrators anticipate their district making any such changes.

Of the 42 administrators who specifically stated what changes their districts have planned, 11 foresee their districts focusing more on marketing and public relations in the future. Fourteen districts will be making programmatic or curricular changes, including three districts that will soon be implementing all-day Kindergarten programs. Four districts will be decreasing class sizes in grades K-3 through the state-funded SAGE program. Six districts mention upcoming facilities improvements, while six districts have other changes planned—offering more sports, for example. The most drastic future change mentioned is the probable closing of one small rural district.

Marketing Techniques of Districts and Types of Information Provided

	Percent Responding:			
	Yes	No	Not Sure	Did Not Answer
<i>How do non-resident parents interested in participating in the Open Enrollment program obtain information about your school district?</i>				
Television/Radio	18	47	20	15
Newspaper	55	23	14	9
District publications (newsletters/brochures/websites)	78	10	7	5
District orientations	12	56	14	19
Parent information night	15	55	13	17
Word-of-mouth referral	81	4	10	5
<i>What kinds of information about your district do you make available?</i>				
Academic/Special programs available	58	33	3	7
Number of openings available	15	74	2	9
School district characteristics	67	24	2	7
Integration opportunities	14	63	10	13



Convenience and Family Relocations Cited as Reasons for Open Enrollment Transfers

Perhaps district administrators do not feel a need to market their districts or make changes because they view Open Enrollment as a convenience for families rather than a program of educational competition.

Our survey results, four years after the program's implementation, are somewhat more pessimistic about Open Enrollment's ability to create competitive change in the districts. When asked whether they believe the program has made public schools more competitive, half believe it will not, down from almost two-thirds in 1998-1999. Currently 8% of respondents believe Open Enrollment will improve the quality of education in their districts, down from 23% in the program's first year.

Competitive Effects

Do you believe the Open Enrollment program...

	1998-1999		2001-2002	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Percent Responding:				
Will make public schools more competitive?	37	63	32	50
Will improve the quality of education in your district?	23	77	8	76

Convenience is Top Reason for Transfer

As for why parents chose to transfer their children to non-resident districts using the Open Enrollment program, the reason provided most often by administrators was convenience. One-fourth of the responses cited convenience issues such as parents working in the non-resident district or a babysitter located in the non-resident district.

The second-most frequent response was the relocation of the student's family. This includes instances where the family moved to a new district and wanted to keep the child in the old district, as well as instances in which the family was planning a move to another district and wanted the child to start out in the new district. In both of these situations, Open Enrollment allows the student to stay in the same district the entire school year, regardless of where s/he lives.

Neither of the first two reasons for transfer cited by administrators is focused on school quality or performance. This may be why administrators do not feel the need to market themselves or make changes to improve their districts. They may feel they cannot help where people might buy a house, find a babysitter or choose to work.

However, administrators do cite as a third reason for transferring parents' dissatisfaction with the previous school district. Some specific areas of dissatisfaction may be reflected in the fourth- and fifth-most frequently mentioned reasons—course offerings and/or programs and academic performance and/or reputation.

Other reasons garnering mention include: living close to the school district's boundaries, athletics and/or extracurricular activities, day care and/or all-day Kindergarten, and school and/or class size.

Reasons for Transfers

In your opinion, what are the main reasons why parents are requesting to transfer their children from one district to another?

	Percent of Responses
1 Convenience	25%
2 Moved	16%
3 Dissatisfaction with resident district	11%
4 Course offerings/programs	9%
5 Academic performance/reputation	8%
6 Live close to school district boundaries	5%
6 Athletics/extracurricular activities	5%
6 Day care/All-day Kindergarten	5%
9 Class size/school size	4%
Other	11%

Note: Respondents could list up to three reasons. The total number of responses was 548. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.



Districts Want Less Bureaucratic Open Enrollment Program

When asked what changes, if any, they would like to see in the Open Enrollment Program, school district administrators overwhelmingly request less paperwork. Another frequently-suggested change that would reduce the administrative burden is to treat non-resident transfers the same as resident students for membership and aid purposes.

Surprisingly, one out of ten administrators simply wish the Open Enrollment program to be ended and the state to require all students to attend school in their resident district. However, nearly as many responses indicate that no changes are currently needed in the program.

To a lesser extent, administrators seek more flexibility in the enrollment procedure with an extended enrollment timeframe and a wait list. Some also see a need for the state to enforce compliance with the program's rules—both by parents and by districts.

Administrators' Suggested Changes

What changes, if any, would you like to see in the Open Enrollment program?

	Percent of Responses
1 Less paperwork	25%
2 Eliminate the program	11%
3 Count transfer students as residents for aid purposes	8%
4 No changes needed	7%
5 Simplify special education costing	6%
6 Extend enrollment timeframe	5%
7 Enforce compliance by parents	4%
7 Create a wait list	4%
9 Enforce compliance by districts	3%
9 Fund actual per pupil costs of receiving district	3%
Other	24%

Note: The total number of responses was 212.

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